

## Ciro D. Rodriguez

### 1946–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1997–2005; 2007–2011  
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

**K**nown for his resilience in the political arena, **C**iro Rodriguez represented two Texas districts in the U.S. House. In the Texas legislature and in Congress, Rodriguez championed a variety of veterans' issues and advocated for increased federal funding for education. "The greatest equalizer is education," he observed. "We must ensure that our children have access to the best education."<sup>1</sup> Convinced of the importance of public service, Rodriguez continued to seek elective office even after redistricting transformed his constituency.

Ciro D. Rodriguez was born in Piedras Negras, Mexico, on December 9, 1946, to Luvin and Aurora (Davis) Rodriguez. Before settling in Texas, the Rodriguez family moved between Mexico and the United States, during which time Rodriguez's father worked on industrial refrigeration units. After living in Eagle Pass, Texas, the Rodriguezes settled in San Antonio in 1951. One of six children, **C**iro Rodriguez held a series of jobs, including selling vegetables in his neighborhood, to help support his family. When his mother passed away, Rodriguez dropped out of high school at age 13 and worked at a gas station. He returned to Harlandale High School, where he graduated with his class in 1966. Rodriguez enrolled in San Antonio College before attending St. Mary's University in San Antonio, where he earned a B.A. in political science in 1973. Two years later he won a seat on the Harlandale Independent School District Board and served until 1987. In 1978 Rodriguez earned a master's degree in social work from Our Lady of the Lake University. He later worked as an educational consultant and a county caseworker. From 1987 to 1996, he returned to Our Lady of the Lake University, where he taught at the Worden School of Social Work. Rodriguez married Carolina Peña, an elementary school teacher and a librarian; the couple had one daughter, Xochil.<sup>2</sup>

In 1987 Rodriguez won election to the Texas house of representatives. During his decade in the state house, he sought to equalize funding between Texas school districts and to promote employment through the private redevelopment of San Antonio's Kelly Air Force Base, which was closed in 1995.<sup>3</sup> When Representative Frank Tejeda succumbed to brain cancer shortly after being sworn into the 105th Congress (1997–1999), Rodriguez entered the March 1997 special election to fill the vacant seat. "It's comforting to see such a groundswell of support and to know that our campaign will clearly be the most aggressive grass-roots effort out there," Rodriguez remarked.<sup>4</sup> Nine Democrats, five Republicans, and an Independent entered the contest to represent the predominantly Hispanic district, which stretched from the southern half of San Antonio to the Mexican border. Rodriguez and Democratic San Antonio councilman Juan Solis quickly distanced themselves from the rest of the pack.<sup>5</sup> Rodriguez earned the backing of many influential Democratic groups and politicians, but the heated campaign was overshadowed by Tejeda's untimely death.<sup>6</sup> Forced into a runoff election since he failed to garner a majority of the vote, Rodriguez easily defeated Solis, 67 to 33 percent.<sup>7</sup> "It was a humbling experience, in all honesty," Rodriguez admitted.<sup>8</sup>

Sworn into Congress on April 17, 1997, Rodriguez, like his predecessor, served on the Committee on National Security (later named Armed Services) and Veterans' Affairs. Both panels were a good fit for his district, which included several military bases and thousands of active and retired military personnel. During the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Rodriguez also was assigned to the Resources Committee and was elected chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), at which time he vowed to make education and health care his top priorities.<sup>9</sup>



In Congress, Rodriguez focused on a range of issues that affected his constituents. A vocal supporter of veterans, the Texas Representative advocated increased educational opportunities and improved health care for current and retired military personnel. Rodriguez also fought to minimize job losses at Kelly Air Force Base by converting its operation to the private sector, an initiative he had backed as a state representative.<sup>10</sup> Concerned about the well-being of his constituents, he proposed tighter security along the U.S.-Mexico border, with expanded law enforcement authority. “Along the border we face a flood of drugs, weapons and human smuggling in addition to coping with illegal immigration,” Rodriguez said.<sup>11</sup> The Texas Representative also advocated a series of education and health care initiatives for Hispanic Americans. In his maiden speech on the House Floor, he expressed his desire to improve the education system for all Americans. “What is going to be the strength of this country is going to be its people, and we need to invest in ourselves and in our people,” Rodriguez observed.<sup>12</sup> Recognizing his commitment to education and his experience in the field, the Democratic leadership in the 106th Congress (1999–2001) appointed him to a task force charged with drafting Party strategy for education programs.<sup>13</sup>

After winning a seat in the 105th Congress, Rodriguez faced minimal opposition in his first three bids for re-election, earning more than 70 percent of the vote in each contest.<sup>14</sup> But redistricting in 2003 drastically changed Rodriguez’s constituency; half the voters were new to the district. In the Democratic primary, Rodriguez squared off against a longtime ally, attorney and former Texas secretary of state Henry Cuellar. While the newly drawn district still encompassed southern San Antonio and snaked south to the Mexican border, the addition of several white suburbs east of San Antonio and the inclusion of a substantial portion of Laredo, Cuellar’s hometown, altered the composition of the district, making for a competitive race.<sup>15</sup> On election night, Rodriguez emerged as the front-runner with a margin of 145 votes, but a recount determined that Cuellar had narrowly bested the incumbent.<sup>16</sup> After a four-month battle that included a

lawsuit and a second recount, Rodriguez lost the nomination to Cuellar by 58 votes.<sup>17</sup> In 2006 Rodriguez tried to recapture his seat but lost to Cuellar, 40 to 53 percent.<sup>18</sup>

Rodriguez’s political fortunes received an unexpected boost in the summer of 2006 after a Supreme Court decision invalidated the boundaries of a district in southwestern Texas on the grounds that the redistricting violated the Voting Rights Act by decreasing the number of Hispanic voters.<sup>19</sup> Federal judges subsequently redrew the district held by seven-term Republican incumbent Henry Bonilla. Running along the Mexican border by the Rio Grande River, the new district stretched from El Paso to San Antonio. With the addition of more voters who were Democratic and Hispanic, especially in his Bexar County power base, Rodriguez entered the November 2006 election. He placed a distant second, capturing only 20 percent of the vote in the field of eight contenders, but since Bonilla narrowly failed to secure a majority—with 49 percent of the vote—a runoff ensued. Rodriguez secured the backing of local and national Democrats and pulled off an upset, winning 54 percent of the vote.<sup>20</sup> “It’s a totally different ball game,” Rodriguez mused after his victory. “Although my basic values haven’t changed, what changes is that I am responding to views of different constituents.”<sup>21</sup>

In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Rodriguez received a spot on the Veterans’ Affairs Committee. He also secured a seat on the influential Appropriations Committee and served on both panels through the 111th Congress (2009–2011). Rodriguez won his re-election bid in 2008—by 56 to 42 percent—against Republican Lyle Larson, a San Antonio county commissioner.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, he lost—44 to 49 percent—to Republican lawyer and banker Francisco (Quico) Canseco in the general election for the 112th Congress (2011–2013).<sup>23</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

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## NOTES

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